

Genital Herpes (Herpes Simplex)

What are Genital Herpes?

Genital herpes are blisters or sores that can appear in and around the genital area. They are caused by the herpes simplex virus which can be transmitted through sexual contact.

- ◆ Herpes affects 20-30 million people in the United States, making it one of the most common sexually transmitted infections.
- ◆ Although herpes cannot be cured, diagnosis allows for proper care that may prevent some outbreaks, make outbreaks less severe, and reduce the risk of transmission of the herpes virus between sexual partners.

What are the symptoms of Genital Herpes?

Symptoms vary in how quickly they appear; 2-30 days after sexual contact with an infected partner or may be dormant for 10 years. Although they vary from person to person, symptoms of the first herpes outbreak may include:

- ◆ itching, tingling, or burning in the genital area
- ◆ painful or difficult urination
- ◆ fever, headache, or muscle aches
- ◆ swollen glands in the genital area
- ◆ the appearance of fluid-filled blisters on the penis, in or around the anus, or in or around the vagina, these will usually break, scab, and heal without scarring in 1-3 weeks.

After the first episode, genital herpes may recur. Recurrence patterns vary from person to person. Some people will have frequent outbreaks, others will experience outbreaks rarely, and about 25% of people with the herpes virus will never have more than one outbreak. Most people find that recurrent episodes are less severe and do not last as long as the first. Symptoms of recurrent outbreaks may include:

- ◆ itching or tingling in the genital area
- ◆ the appearance of herpes blisters or sores

How can I get Genital Herpes?

Herpes is transmitted through direct contact with herpes blisters or with sexual fluids that have contacted a sore. Generally, herpes is contracted through sexual contact with a partner who is infected. This includes:

- ◆ vaginal/ penile sex
- ◆ anal sex
- ◆ oral sex (Oral herpes, or "cold sores," can cause genital herpes infection and genital herpes can cause oral infection).

How can I prevent or protect against the transmission of herpes?

Genital Herpes can be prevented by:

- ◆ practicing abstinence
- ◆ practicing monogamy with an uninfected partner

You can reduce your risk of contracting genital herpes by:

- ◆ limiting your number of sexual partners
- ◆ using a latex condom or other latex barrier every time you have sexual contact with anyone
- ◆ avoiding sexual contact with partners who have visible signs of genital herpes

If you have the herpes virus, or if your partner does, the risk of transmission can be reduced by:

- ◆ avoiding sexual contact while there is an active herpes outbreak. An outbreak is considered active from the time that an itching or tingling sensation appears (before the actual blister develops) until the skin in that area is completely healed.
- ◆ using a condom or other latex barrier every time you have sex

Am I at risk? Should I be tested?

If you have had unprotected sex, have had more than one sexual partner, or if your sexual partner has ever had sexual contact with anyone else you could be at risk for herpes.

If you believe you are at risk and/or you have symptoms of genital herpes you should see a health care provider. If you develop an unexplained blister or sore do not wait until it has disappeared to be examined. Genital herpes can be most easily diagnosed while there is an active outbreak and seeing a health practitioner while a sore is present allows him/her to tell you whether or not it is caused by the herpes virus.

What can I do to treat Genital Herpes?

Although herpes cannot be cured, there are steps you can take to reduce the severity and frequency of outbreaks. These include:

- ◆ Take care of your general health, get as much sleep as you need, eat healthful foods, and avoid stress whenever possible. Stress and certain foods including coffee, cola, and chocolate, may trigger outbreaks.
- ◆ You may be prescribed an antiviral medication, called Acyclovir or Valcyclovir, to help heal the blisters.
- ◆ To aid healing and to be more comfortable while active sores are present keep the infected area clean and dry. You may apply a light coating of Desitin or Vaseline.
- ◆ Avoid touching or allowing others to touch herpes blisters. To avoid reinfecting yourself, always wash your hands after having contact with the blisters.
- ◆ It is strongly suggested that you be tested for other STDs (HIV, syphilis, chlamydia, etc.) when you are first diagnosed with Genital Herpes.

Should my partner be treated?

Yes

Is there any follow-up care?

- ◆ It is recommended that you have regular Pap tests (one each year), in order to detect possible cell changes in the cervix.
- ◆ If you should become pregnant, it is important to let your health care provider know that you have a history of herpes. If the herpes virus is present on a mother's skin during childbirth there is a risk of passing herpes to the infant. This can be avoided if your health care provider is aware of your history.
- ◆ It is important that you and your partner practice safer sex **by using a latex condom or other latex barrier every time you have sex.**

For more information visit:

American Social Health Association at <http://www.ashastd.org/>

Center for Disease Control and Prevention at <http://www.cdc.gov/std/>